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JOHN W. ALEXANDER IN THE THEATRE

BY HOMER SAINT-GAUDENS

WHEN I first saw John W. Alexander in 1884, he was painting a cow on a creamery sign here in Cornish, N. H. When I last met him he was criticising the scenery of "The Legend of Leonora." The cow still remains. But his work in the theatre has vanished after the fashion of all things theatrical; so I would speak of it before the memory of what he brought behind the curtain becomes dim.

Freak art on the stage is a matter of everyday occurrence. But the need for an artist of calibre and conservative sanity as an adviser regarding our scenery and costumes, where a producer requires beauty rather than eccentricity, has been pitiful. Nor is the realization of such a need a new one. Because years ago, in England, if I remember rightly, Irving employed Alma-Tadema and, I think, Burne-Jones in just such a capacity. For the most part, however, in this land judgments on scenery have been posteriori judgments; that is to say a "set" is built, and, as its lines appear pleasant or ugly, the "set" is accepted or discarded. No one about the playhouse can tell why the result proves hideous or successful except that it looks that way. Also the same haphazard condition continues true of the scenery's "better-half," the lighting. It becomes a case of: "Now let's try a blue gelatine. Let's try an amber. Put on two ambers." Such a condition makes those who knew Alexander look back to his trained taste and influence with admiration. Yet he never became a designer of scenery in the generally accepted sense of the word. It was not so much what he did as what he suggested that counted.

It would be impossible to compare Alexander's results on canvas with his work on the stage. He is known preeminently for his portraits which exist, whereas of his efforts in this side issue only his influence remains, perhaps most vividly to be seen at present, in the performances of the revival of "The Little Minister." But a glance at his paintings will show, nevertheless, how fitted he was for his task. In these canvases it is obvious that Alexander

never became a slave to mannerisms or eccentricities, though at all times filled with unaffected individuality. Steadily he followed the Japanese convention in directing his best efforts to adorn. Yet without Oriental stiffness his decorative sense went hand in hand with a power to interpret the heart and feelings of his subject.

I fancy Alexander first came to work on the stage because of his liking for Miss Maude Adams, whose neighbor he had been during many summers at Oteora in the Catskills. She has told me time and again of his immeasurable value to her at the production she gave of Schiller's "Jeanne d'Arc" in the Harvard stadium at Cambridge, Mass. To my personal knowledge he appeared in the course of every play she has staged while I have been with her from "Peter Pan" on. There is no need to go further afield to illustrate his talent.

For example: "Are those cannon and their mountings a good brown?" he was asked one night during a dress rehearsal of the Pirate Ship scene of "Peter Pan."

"I think I'd paint them black," came his quiet voice from the dark of the auditorium.

Why of course they should be painted black. Yet that feeling of the obvious is invariably the result of good art. Bad art remains the unexpected and the complicated.

The chief personal qualities that made Alexander's work precious to theatrical folk was his adaptability and his perfect understanding and acceptance of the restrictions under which they labored. He was not one of those who drew a sketch and then harbored ill-feeling should it fail to be carried out. In fact, barring little drawings on the backs of envelopes and the like, I do not think I ever saw a sketch of his. On the contrary, he accepted the theatre itself as his canvas with the actual material objects that formed the scene as his pigments and invariably patient and good-humored came, whenever asked, to carpenter shop or stage to suggest changes or developments.

In so doing he understood that, though it

might be comparatively simple to obtain beauty in an especial set built with a blue-domed sky or on a particular stage, his task was to evolve beauty which could be handled by representatives of the carpenter's union, beauty which could be put in boxes to be dumped night after night through the 7-foot door of a 60-foot baggage car, beauty capable of contracting itself and submitting to a block and tackle for a second-floor stage in Galt, Canada, or of expanding almost to the dimensions of a baseball field on the huge stage of the theatre in San Diego, Cal., beauty which would attract an audience not only in Boston, Mass., but in McAlester, Okla. For this is the only kind of beauty that stands any chance of being appreciated in these United States.

To the more efficient carrying out of his desire on the stage, also, Alexander excluded both pretense and theories. Modestly, probably unconsciously, he remembered at all times that, in the theatre, his work became the work of a framer; and the province of the framer is to set off the picture, not to detract from it. Consequently he laid down no royal rule as to the construction of this frame. He quite well understood that its development depended on the needs of the whole as established by the author; that a Drury Lane melodrama required scenery and lots of it, that Greek classicism needed virtually none. And as he was never urged toward either extreme he avoided both exaggerated simplicity and overworked reality to merge his task into the composition of the play as the component parts demanded.

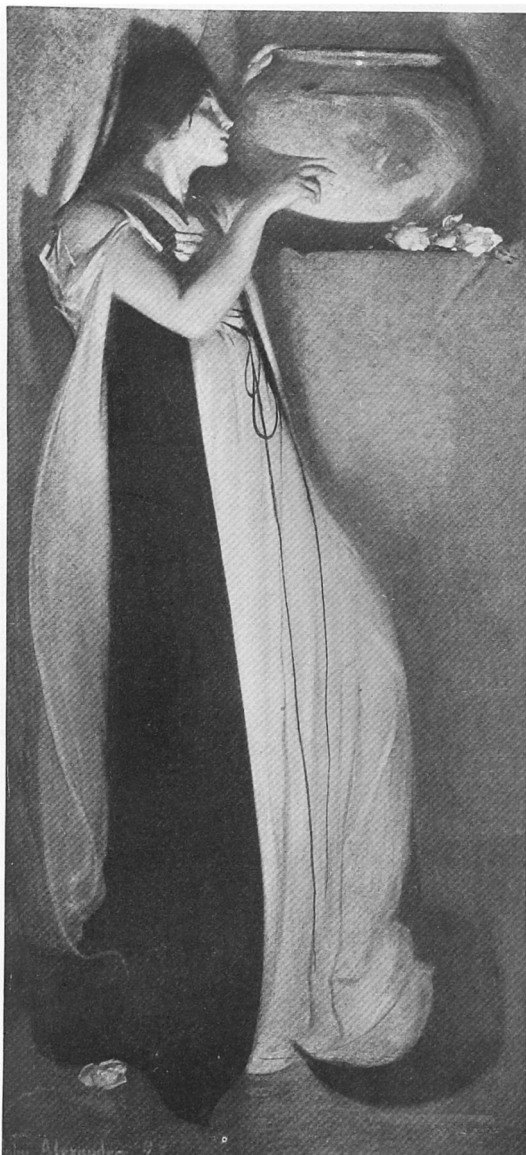
Perhaps Alexander's most important contribution was his unspoken, but ultimately realized insistence that what the actor really needs is a light-absorbing, rather than a light-reflecting background, a surface that will offer a soothing contrast to the actor's face, not one that makes an almost human attempt to get between the player and the audience. Therefore, rather than paint, especially that wicked stage water-color paint called "tempora," which so persistently shrieks its high-keyed tones, stains of dull greens and umbers became the order of the day; while the costumes themselves supplied the needed color where the accents were most

sensibly to be placed, on the actors. And with the stains not canvas, well-sized, glistening canvas, but scrims, gauze, felt, burlaps and other such materials arrived to vex the carpenter with their elusive flimsiness and ability to tear.

Another condition which came to be set forth more and more clearly beneath Alexander's guidance was that seemingly obvious but seldom realized fact that what counts in the play world is not the way a thing is but the way a thing looks. Of course most stage material is imitation. But the theatre man's whole end in life has been to make this imitation resemble the actual object as closely as possible. Whereas Alexander sought rather to produce the effect of the thing to those who sat back of the orchestra leader. Ask a city dweller to look at a woodchuck in a field, and he will think he sees a stump. The ordinary producer would represent such a situation by means of a carefully lighted stuffed woodchuck. Alexander would have insisted on the vaguely seen right kind of a stump.

The use of stencils with light behind them to represent distant objects, was the most important result of this tendency. We all of us know how amusing were the silhouettes of our grandfather's day. But the fact that this principle could be applied to out-of-door nature and produce a gracious suggestion of fairylike reality occurred to none, until, with the aid of two architects interested in this line of work, Mr. Arthur Hewlett and Mr. Munroe Hewlett, such effects were at last obtained.

Cycloramas did it. The first cyclorama, the one nearest the audience, would be a semi-circular curtain of fine transparent gauze, reaching from one side of the proscenium arch well toward the back wall and down to the other side. On it was silhouetted in opaque black cloth the forms to be desired, let us say of the trunks and branches of pine trees cleverly adapted from well-taken photographs. Here was the wood. Behind that hung a second cyclorama of blue cloth. On this would be thrown an amount of soft blue light. There was the sky, and, moreover, owing to the gauze, a sky of extraordinary depth and quality. Instantly the audience was looking through the leafy edge of a wood.

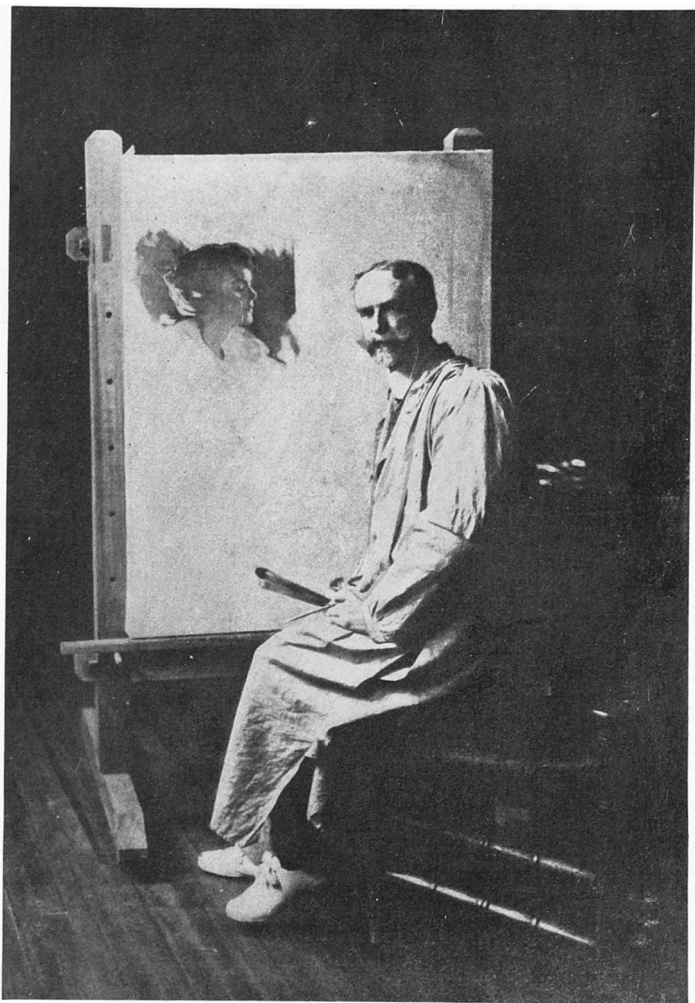


POT OF BASIL

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

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THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON



JOHN W. ALEXANDER IN HIS STUDIO AT ONTEORA

"Very good for 'up stage,'" a novice or an old timer at this sort of thing might say. "But how will such scenery blend with a tree nearer the footlights that a capably real actor must play against?"

Excellently; and the scheme has been repeated and developed again and again from the second scene of "Chantecler"

six years ago to the first act of "The Little Minister" this season. The tree would be made of sacking wrapped around a roll of chicken wire and stained varying dull greens and browns with a water color spray. Not for a moment would it suffer from contact with the actor, who, by the way, never was, is, or can be, real.

All this might be quite proper for the fantastic, but could it apply to the modern? Turn to the first act of "The Legend of Leonora." It arrived from England a bright, blotting-paper blue. Blue paint it was, mind you, for wall paper is an impossibility on the stage. So before long brown burlaps eventuated, also human furniture and chintz, not the sort designed to "carry across the foots" but the variety you might have in your own home, and there stood before the public a library that had both charm and liveableness.

Also, whether the piece was imaginative or real, the actors, too, who moved within these pictures came under Alexander's power. Of course a player is frequently credited by sarcastic critics with being even more interested in how to dress a part than in how to act it. But, with the exception of some of the older and saner men, the chief trouble is that the actor, once set upon this problem, studies how to dress so that the result will accord with his own beauty rather than with the character of the play as a whole. Hence the reason for Alexander. And when, with the help of Mrs. Alexander, who was his aid and able executive in all things, such characters as the "Judge" in "The Legend of Leonora" had his genuine English "pink" robe dyed to a less offensive red, or the various players in "The Ladies Shakespeare" found themselves compelled to don coarsely woven tights, the bewilderment of the "profession" was as extensive as the unconscious satisfaction of the audience.

Scenery is becoming more and more a matter of lighting, thanks to electricity. Yet pause for a moment to consider how the average manager looks upon his lights. To begin with, he regards them as a negative blanket to cover a multitude of sins, rather than as a positive implement to aid the beauty of what he represents.

"When the lights are on, it will look all right from the front," he will say. If you do not believe this, watch the next load of "flats" going down the street on a "transfer wagon," and remember that though on the street the scene appears to be the remnants of a soiled "burlesque" company, it may be seen in place at night as the spick and span outfit of a "first-class production."

Furthermore, though in real life we are

accustomed to the constant presence of shadows, to the manager the shadow is a curse. If, for example, the shade of the "Leading Man" should stretch over many acres of field represented on the back drop, think of the remarks of the audience. So for years the average producer has made a practice of killing the shadow from one light by throwing the glare of a still more strenuous brilliance against the painted cloth on which the shadow fell. Of course the reflection of light from that paint dazzled those "out in front" to such an extent that they could not see the company. Consequently more light was turned on actors with another shadow resulting. And so on "ad infinitum" until the player, though in the center of any quantity of illumination, appeared as pasty—flat and ineffective as the Jack of Hearts in a new pack of cards.

It becomes easy, after a moment's regard of Alexander's painting, to understand how such a problem would strike him. For though his color was at all times rich, it won its effects chiefly by the play of subdued light; while his complex tones were musical rather than loud or violent in their results. His aim, therefore was not to hide, so to speak, behind intense light, but to bring out the more gentle and alluring qualities of light, not to kill the shadow but to train it to the producer's will. He saw at once that what makes scenery effective is not the color of an object itself, so much as the color and quantity of light on that object. It was futile, from his point of view, to bother with a red Indian blanket if it was bound to turn an aggressive purple when shown in a required moonlight scene. He knew, too, as a matter of course, that it is not the brilliancy of light that attracts, but the half-tones it produces, the familiar bright spots and connotative darks, the soothing contrasts and occasional sharp emphasis, such as we pass in life day by day. He saw that though the word "picture" is constantly employed in stage slang, nevertheless, barring the use of the self-assertive "spot," there was no general focusing of interest by the light upon the stage, just as in painting the arrangement of color and light, and shade leads the visitor's eye to the dominant note that the artist desires to effect. Therefore, Alexander, in his work



SUNLIGHT

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

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THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

with these pictures, bounded by the 30-foot opening of a proscenium arch, said indirectly, but repeatedly, that, since the theatre, like painting, presents a condensation of life that should seem real without being so, the designer must follow the same general footsteps of the painter to suppress the unessential, accent the vital, eliminate

the millions of irrelevant details and emphasize the few that convey the impression to be given.

Such, then, are the reasons why though Alexander never made a sketch for a scene, and, as far as I know, never voiced a theory regarding scenery, his influence proved invaluable for our stage. His work never

became the subject for new art books or table talk, because he understood too well that good scenery and lighting is not noticeable scenery and lighting, that as soon as an audience dwells upon a "clever effect," the real purpose of the scene is

defeated. The public comes to the theatre first and foremost to see acting. Alexander knew this. What is more he knew that the stage is therefore the alembic which must blend all these essentials into one great illusion with acting.



HER BIRTHDAY

JOHN W. ALEXANDER



THE PEOPLE

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

ONE OF A SERIES OF PANELS IN

THE CARNEGIE INSTITUTE, PITTSBURGH



A ROSE

JOHN W. ALEXANDER